

**sail away, kill off the hours (you belong somewhere
you feel free) by KateWarne**

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Summary:

She shook her head, and thought about everything she could say. She was thankful for a bedroom without tiled walls, for her TV, for a freezer stocked up with Eggos. She was thankful for a father who truly cared for her. She was thankful for Lucas and Dustin and Will. She was thankful for Mike. She was thankful to be eating the best food she'd ever had in her life. But mostly, she was thankful for the beginning of her life, however late it came.

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Author's Note:

This is for The Writer's Guild Fall Free for All created by Valbirch. Note: I apologize for the historical inaccuracy. The pilgrims were murderers but they didn't really talk about that on the 80s. Also the Byers are Jewish because I said so. Without further ado, my fic:

El Hopper stood on her tiptoes, peering at the calender that hung on the wall of her cabin. This month, November, had a picture of a brown and orange bird and a few pumpkins. She liked that picture.

She placed her index finger on that day's date. November 14th, 1984. She slid her finger along the empty squares until she stopped at one, a week later, with a small note printed at the top of the box.

Thanksgiving Day

She frowned a little. She knew what 'thanks' was. A word you use when someone does something nice for you. She also knew what 'giving was.' To let someone have something that's yours. But the two words together meant nothing to her.

She walked over to the bookshelf and pulled out her well-worn copy of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. She walked over to the couch and sat down with the book in her lap. She opened it up to the T's, and scanned through the various words until she found the one she wanted.

thanks·giv·ing

,THaNGks'giviNG/

noun

1. the expression of gratitude, especially to God
"he offered prayers in thanksgiving for his safe arrival"

2. (in North America) an annual national holiday marked by religious observances and a traditional meal including turkey. The holiday commemorates a harvest festival celebrated by the Pilgrims in 1621, and is held in the US on the fourth Thursday in November. A similar holiday is held in Canada, usually on the second Monday in October.

She recognized some of the words, but the whole thing was too complicated for her. She felt a hot spike of frustration in her gut. She wasn't at the reading level of her friends, she knew that, accepted that, but she felt in that moment all of the years she had lost to the lab. All of the years she could've been learning and growing. She shook away those thoughts. She had a guardian who cared about her, friends who loved her. She was lucky.

She resolved to ask Hopper later about 'Thanksgiving.'

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That night they had meatloaf for dinner and El doesn't hate it per say, because anything is better than the lab food, but it definitely isn't her favorite of all the microwave meals she and Hopper eat. He did let her have fruit punch though, which made up for it. She had all but forgotten what she was going to ask him, but then she glanced over at the calender and she remembered her question.

"What is 'Thanksgiving?'" El asked. Hopper looked at her curiously for a moment

"Where did you find that word?" Hopper asked. El pointed to the calendar.

"Ah. Well, Thanksgiving is a holiday in America. A long time ago, people across the world in Europe didn't know America existed. Some people came over by accident and found that people already lived here. More people came to live here but it was hard for them, so the people already living here helped them. They shared a meal together,

and nowadays we celebrate that by sharing a meal with our friends and family." Hopper took a bite of his meatloaf.

El understood what he was saying. But she was eating a meal with her family now. What was so different about Thanksgiving?

"Why is it so different from today?" El asked.

"Well, we eat turkey and stuffing and mashed potatoes and other good foods, and we say what we're thankful for."

"Thankful?"

"Two words of the day, you're lucky. To be thankful means to be happy with what you have, to understand how lucky you are to have these things. You can be thankful for your friends or your family or the good food or anything you want," Hopper said.

"Can we have 'Thanksgiving?'" El asked, eyes pleading.

"Sure, kid. Why not?"

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Later that night, when she was in bed, El heard Hopper walk over to the phone, punch in a number, and wait to hear a reply.

"Hey Joyce, it's me," El heard him say.

A pause as she replied.

"No, it's nothing bad. I just have a favor to ask," he said.

"El just asked me what Thanksgiving was, and now she wants to have one of her own. And I want to give her that because she deserves that, at least. But Joyce, I can't cook to save my life," Hopper said.

Another pause as Joyce said something on the other end.

"Oh, no Joyce, I couldn't ask you to do that!" Hopper exclaimed.

Another pause.

"Okay, if you're sure..."

A final pause.

"Thank you so much, Joyce. Okay, I'll talk to you later. Bye."

Hopper placed the phone back in its cradle and walked near El's room. She quickly shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep.

"Let me guess," Hopper said, standing in her doorway, "You heard the whole thing."

El opened her eyes and nodded.

"You're too nosy for your own good. But I guess I can tell you. Joyce invited us over to have Thanksgiving dinner with her and Jonathan and Will," he said.

El frowned. "What about the 'Don't Be Stupid Rules?'"

"I can sneak you out through the woods. Luckily the Byers' house is along the treeline. And even though you have to stay in for another year, it's not as dangerous as before."

"Thank you," she said, smiling slightly.

"You're welcome, kid," he said, "Now get some sleep."

Hopper closed her door until it was only open a crack. She shut her eyes and drifted off, the feeling of excitement still turning her stomach.

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The week and a half passed quickly, not that she had something to look forward to. Her almost daily visits from the boys were filled with their own Thanksgiving stories and they only made El even

more excited for what was to come.

When the day finally came, she woke up early and pulled on her best sweater, a brown and red one she may or may not have stolen from Mike, and her pair of jeans with the least holes. Hopper told her that they wouldn't be going anywhere until that night, but she couldn't help being excited. The day passed slowly, as she tried to occupy herself with anything.

Finally, finally, Hopper came home and she pulled on her white Converse and frilly socks and they set off through the woods to the Byers' house. The walk wasn't long, but even if it was, El was too occupied with her own thoughts and anticipations to notice. They finally reached the back door and she knocked politely, just as Hopper had told her to do.

Joyce opened the door with a smile and welcomed them in. The first thing that El noticed was the smell. She wasn't able to describe it in words, but she knew it smelled better than any meal she ever had. She was so caught up in it that she didn't even notice Will approaching her.

"If you like that, you should smell our house during Hannuka," Will said, smiling at her.

She frowned a little and looked up at Hopper, who mouthed a small 'I'll tell you later.'

"How are you, El?" Will asked.

"I'm good. Hungry," she said.

"Well, good. Jonathan is just finishing up. And then we can eat," Will said, he reached out hesitantly and took her hand. She let him lead her away as Joyce and Hopper talked about adult things.

They walked past the kitchen and found Jonathan pulling a large casserole dish out of the oven. He spotted them and smiled.

"Hey, El," he said. He found a place on the counter amongst all of the

other dishes already there and placed the dish down.

"Hi," she said, a little shyly. She didn't know Jonathan very well, but she knew he was a friend.

"This is your first Thanksgiving, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"Ever had mac & cheese before?" Jonathan asked, gesturing to the dish.

"From the microwave," she said.

Jonathan shook his head. "I can't believe Hopper's been feeding you that crap. Trust me, you'll like this much better. Dinner will be ready soon."

El nodded politely, and Will lead her to the couch where they sat down.

"How much do you know about Thanksgiving?" Will asked.

"Only what Lucas and Dustin and Mike and Hopper told me," El said.

"Well, what did they say?"

"Lucas says he visits all his cousins in Chicago."

"Yeah, Lucas has a big family."

"Dustin says he watches football with his mom."

"It's mostly for his mom. Dustin doesn't really like sports," Will said.

El nodded. "And Mike said his mom cooks really good food."

"His mom's a good cook," Will said. El remembered a promise that Mike had made to her a long time ago, that she could live with him and his mom would cook her real food, not just Eggos. That hadn't

happened, through no fault of Mike's, and she had a home now, so it didn't matter to her.

"Guys, dinner's ready!" Jonathan called from the dining room. Will and El stood up and walked over to the table to find it covered in various dishes of all shapes and colors.

Joyce and Hopper followed them in and they all sat down, El in between Hopper and Will. Everyone dug in, heaping large servings of food unto their plate using large serving spoons. El watched the flurry of activity in awe, feeling a little hesitant to fill her own plate.

"Do you want me to make up a plate for you, El?" Joyce asked, noticing El's empty plate.

"No, I can do it."

El reached forwards towards a plate with circles of redish jelly. She put one on her plate and moved onto the mac and cheese, which she knew she liked. Jonathan cut her a piece of turkey and she added that to her plate. She almost skipped over the green beans, but one stern look from Hopper made her put some on her plate as well. She was passed the mashed potatoes and she smothered them with gravy. Finally, she was given a roll from Will, who smiled at her encouragingly.

She started to eat. She liked the jelly, which Jonathan called cranberry sauce. She also liked the mashed potatoes and gravy and she finished her turkey almost as soon as she got it. She watched Joyce who spread butter onto her roll, and she did the same, finding that it tasted so much better with it.

About halfway through the meal, Joyce spoke up. "Okay, now what is everyone thankful for this year?" she asked.

"I'll go first," Jonathan said. "I'm thankful for Hopper and El, for joining us."

El blushed a little bit and smiled at him. Joyce and Will nodded in agreement.

"I'm thankful for the food," Hopper said, giving Jonathan an approving nod.

"I'm thankful to have Will back, really back," Joyce said, tears in her eyes. She reached across the table to grasp Will's hand.

"I'm grateful to be me again," Will said simply, and everyone smiled in agreement.

"What about you, El? What are you thankful for?" Jonathan asked.

She looked a little bewildered. She wasn't used to being put on the spot, but she really did want to participate, just like everyone else.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to," Will assured her.

She shook her head, and thought about everything she could say. She was thankful for a bedroom without tiled walls, for her TV, for a freezer stocked up with Eggos. She was thankful for a father who truly cared for her. She was thankful for Lucas and Dustin and Will. She was thankful for Mike. She was thankful to be eating the best food she'd ever had in her life. But mostly, she was thankful for the beginning of her life, however late it came.

She didn't know how to put that in words in a way they'd understand. Instead, she said simply, "I'm thankful to be here," and she hoped it encompassed all she was thinking and feeling. Jonathan and Joyce smiled at her. Hopper placed a hand on her shoulder. Will took her right hand and squeezed.

And she knew they understood.